

Executive Summary

On March 6, 2007, President Bush created the *Task Force on Returning Global War on Terror Heroes*. The purpose of the Task Force was to improve the delivery of Federal services and benefits to Global War on Terror servicemembers and veterans.

The President appointed the Secretary of Veterans Affairs as Task Force Chair. Membership consisted of the Secretaries of Defense, Labor, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Education, plus the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, the Administrator of the Small Business Administration, and the Director of the Office of Personnel Management. Under the terms of the President's Executive Order, the Task Force had 45 days to complete the following:

- Identify and examine existing Federal services that currently are provided to returning Global War on Terror (GWOT) servicemembers
- Identify existing gaps in such services
- Seek recommendations from appropriate Federal agencies on ways to fill those gaps
- Ensure that appropriate Federal agencies are communicating and cooperating effectively
- Develop a Government-wide Action Plan that ensures that in providing services to these servicemembers, appropriate Federal agencies are communicating and cooperating effectively

The Task Force utilized a gap analysis approach to determine the manner and extent to which services and benefits are provided to GWOT servicemembers and veterans. The Task Force received over 2,400 comments from veterans, active duty personnel, veterans service organizations, and other interested parties.

The Task Force inventoried Federal services and benefits available to servicemembers. Work groups assessed and analyzed emerging themes related to the current delivery of services and benefits. The Task Force focused on recommendations that could be implemented within agency authority and existing resource levels. A focus of the work groups was on timeliness, ease of application, and efficient delivery of services.

One topic from the analysis pertained to evaluating an injured GWOT servicemember's military readiness in a consistent manner across all military branches in conjunction with the VA disability compensation process. As part of this Task Force effort, DoD and VA agreed to develop a joint process of assigning disability ratings used to determine fitness for military retention, level of disability for retirement, and VA disability compensation.

Prior to the Task Force being established, DoD and VA announced an agreement to collaborate on the development of a joint inpatient electronic health record. This initiative will make health care data on shared beneficiaries immediately accessible within both Departments.

Another area of focus derived from the analysis was for Federal entities to collaborate and, in some cases, to co-manage the delivery of services and benefits to injured GWOT servicemembers and disabled veterans. Currently, there are no formal interagency agreements between DoD and VA to transfer case management responsibilities across the military services and VA. A Task Force recommendation calls for VA and DoD to develop a system of co-management and case management that promotes continuity of care.

While not a specific recommendation, the Task Force worked in partnership with the General Services Administration to unveil a new version of *www.usa.gov* to include a specialized section of Internet links to Federal services and benefits available to military servicemembers, veterans, and their families.

The Task Force Report includes 25 recommendations to improve delivery of Federal services to returning military men and women. The recommendations identify responsible agency as well as a discussion, gap analysis, impact statement, and implementation strategy. The Government-wide Action Plan contains steps for individual Department or Agency commitment and incorporates cooperative interaction among those providing complimentary services.

The following recommendations focus on improving the process for receiving services and increased awareness of available benefits among servicemembers and their families:

Health Care

- Develop a system of co-management and case management for returning servicemembers to facilitate ease of transfer from Department of Defense care to VA care.
- Screen all GWOT veterans seen in VA health care facilities for mild to moderate Traumatic Brain Injury.
- Assist the VA enrollment process by modifying the VA 10-10EZ form for GWOT servicemembers, enhance the on-line benefits package to self-identify GWOT servicemember, and expand the use of DoD military service information to establish eligibility for health care benefits.
- Require VA to provide full support at Post-Deployment Health Reassessments for Guard and Reserve members to enroll eligible members and schedule appointments.
- Standardize VA Liaison agreements across all Military Treatment Facilities.
- Expand VA access to DoD records to coordinate improved transfer of a servicemember's medical care through patient "hand-off."
- Enhance the Computerized Patient Record System (CPRS) to more specifically track GWOT servicemembers.
 - Develop a Veterans Tracking Application and identifiers to improve monitoring of returning GWOT servicemembers.
 - Create a Polytrauma identifier to increase recognition of additional needs of those injured servicemembers.
 - Create a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) database to track patients who have experienced TBI.
 - Create a DoD/VA interface for health care providers to have access to data on combat theater injured servicemembers.
- Create an "Embedded Fragment" surveillance center to monitor returning servicemembers who have possibly retained fragments of materials in order to provide early medical intervention.
- Enhance capacity for GWOT servicemembers to receive dental care in the private sector as VA continues to improve their capacity for dental services at their facilities.
- Expand collaboration between VA and the Department of Health and Human Services to improve access to returning servicemembers in remote or rural areas.
- VA and the Department of Health and Human Services' Indian Health Service (IHS) will expand coordination on IT interoperability with the goal to adopt standardized data-sharing between the VA and IHS health care partners.

Benefits

- Develop a joint DoD/VA process for disability benefit determinations by establishing a cooperative Medical and Physical Evaluation Board process within the military service branches and VA.
- Extend determination time limit in VA Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program beyond 12 months to allow additional time for returning servicemembers to better understand their rehabilitation needs.
- Expedite handling of adapted housing and special home adaptation grants claims by notifying the returning GWOT applicant within 48 hours of rating decision.

Jobs, Education, and Housing

- Expand eligibility of Small Business Administration PatriotExpress Loan to provide full range of lending, business counseling, and procurement programs to veterans, service-disabled veterans, reservists, and families if the desire for a returning servicemember or family is to obtain self-employment.
- DoD and the Department of Labor will collaborate to improve Civilian Workforce Credentialing and Certification allowing for greater exposure of a servicemember's military experience to civilian opportunities.
- The Department of Labor will work with DoD to develop a Wounded Veterans Intern Program to provide valuable work experience to injured GWOT servicemenbers while they are in medical hold status and are transitioning to separate from military service.
- The Department of Housing and Urban Development will expand access to the National Housing Locator (NHL) to be used by servicemembers and veterans through DoD and VA. The NHL was initially launched as a response to needs for victims of Hurricane Katrina. By expanding its use, returning servicemembers will have a resource that provides safe, disability accessible if needed, and affordable housing to ease in the potential re-location to a new geographic area.

Outreach

- Increase attendance at the Transition Assistance and Disabled Transition Assistance Programs (TAP/DTAP) for active duty, Guard, and Reserve.
- The Department of Education, in cooperation with the Department of Labor, will participate in DoD job fairs to provide returning servicemembers and their families with an awareness of the post-secondary education benefits available.
- The Department of Labor, through the Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS), will participate in the Workforce Investment System in every state and territory and partner with over 120 private and public sector job fairs to expand the number of employers involved in active veteran recruitment.
- The Department of Labor and DoD will promote awareness of the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) rights to improve active duty, Guard, and Reservists' understanding of their rights at entry to, during, and exiting from military service.
- The Department of Education will provide education benefits training to the 211 Transition Assistance Program sites serving over 150,000 transitioning servicemembers annually.
- The Office of Personnel Management will expand their military treatment facility outreach to promote the availability of Federal employment and veterans' preference rights.
- The VA Global War on Terrorism newsletter mailed quarterly to returning servicemembers will be modified to provide consistent summaries and awareness of available Federal services and benefits.

In summary, the Task Force focused on actions to improve government performance and results. Agencies will be expected to implement recommendations within agreed upon target dates.